Southern Excursions

Posted on



Hambantota

A southern district favoured with its coastal location hambantota is endowed with scenic beauty, wildlife and tales and treasures of antiquity.

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What was once the Kingdom of Ruhuna established as far back as 200 BC has today evolved with its many inherent qualities; its fertile soil to vast expanses of paddy fields, its arid landscapes dotted with pools of estuarine water to sanctuaries for the wild, and its coastal belt to a resourceful fishing harbour. The colourful splash of fishing boats docked at its harbour is a striking feature and lays claim to its name, ‘Hamban’ and ‘tota’ that translate to ‘port of fishing boats’. Today, Hambantota is fast emerging with the modern pace of the world, already host to an international cricket stadium, a modern-day maritime port and an upcoming international airport. Short distances away from the busy hub of life are its many and varied attractions.

Tales of Antiquity

The way to Tissamaharama, the Hambantota-Tissamaharama road unfolds with the distinctive features of this southern region. Intensely green paddy fields beneath azure skies and wayside stalls selling the freshest buffalo curd that Tissamaharama is famed for are intermittent sights. Tissamaharama is the namesake of its ancient temple built by King Kavantissa who ruled the Kingdom during 156 – 161 BC. The

white bubble shaped stupa characterises the landscape with its striking presence at 180 feet. With sacred relics of the Buddha entombed within, it is a frequented site of worship among Buddhists.

The Tissamaharama town earns a pleasing atmosphere with its remnants of history particularly the picturesque Tissa Wewa with its heavily shaded embankments that make an ideal pitstop for passers-by. Across this olden day tank built by the King the gleaming white stupa looms in the distance. Along the Tissa-Debawarawewa road is another site of interest. The Yatala Chaitya exudes an aura of antiquity with stone pillars and ancient brick remains in the vicinity. At its forefront is a moat like pond with lily pads coating its surface that adds to the charm of the area. The stupa is said to have been built by the King Mahanaga, the founder of the Ruhunu Kingdom, to mark the birth of his son Yatala Tissa who was born at the very location. Stone inscriptions reveal that here too relics of the Buddha are enshrined.

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Nature Escapades

Along the coast to the east of Hambantota is the vast expanse of Bundala National Park. The first to be named a RAMSAR site in the island, Bundala is best known for its dense bird populations drawn to the park for its brackish lagoons and marshlands that host both migratory and resident birds. While a variety of waders are commonly sighted here, hawk eagle, fish eagle, whistling duck and many other birds are the easily recognised among the 200 species that make this a bird watcher’s paradise. At the coastal end of the park sand dunes undulate over to a precipitous cliff that plunges down to the sea and beach below and adds to the evolving landscapes that traverses the park. Sitting upon the cliff affords a breathtaking view of the deep blue waters below where turtles surf the waves as they emerge to the surface.

Reached via Tissamaharama is the renowned Yala National Park farther east of Hambantota. In contrast to the serene environs of Bundala, Yala promises a more adventurous safari home to diverse wildlife inhabitants. With its dense leopard population, a sighting is often the highlight among other animals that inhabit the park. Elephants, herds of deer, sambur, and wild boar can be sighted across Yala Block 1 throughout the day. Deep within the park lies an ancient site of Buddhist

significance, the Situlpawwa rock temple that dates back to the 2nd Century BC. Referred to as the ‘hill of the quiet mind’, a steep ascent along the stone hewn stairway leads to the two stupas atop the rock outcrop. The monastery that is today named the Situlpawwa Raja Maha Viharaya is believed to have been occupied by 1200 arahat monks who took refuge in the tranquil precincts that even today overlooks the sprawling canopies of the Yala wilderness.

While The Festival Falls During The Month Of July Or August, It Is A Site Of Worship And Obeisance Throughout The Year.

Spiritual Realm

Less than an hour away from Hambantota lies Kataragama, a precinct steeped in religious fervour and spirituality.

Each year the sacred city as it is so named, draws throngs of devotees on pilgrimage to venerate God Kataragama at the Maha Devale or the Main Shrine. While the festival falls during the month of July or August, it is a site of worship and obeisance throughout the year. Situated besides the banks of the Menik River, Kataragama draws people from all religions who visit the Devale, the ancient Kiri Vehera regarded as one of the important Buddhist pilgrimage sites in the country, and Sella Kataragama and Vedi Hiti Kanda (mountain of abode), which are two other sites of religious significance in relation to God Kataragama.

The Princess Betrothed The Reigning King Of The Region To Become Vihara Maha Devi And Her Statue Stands High Upon A Rock In Kirinda That Bears Testimony To The Legend That Still Lives On Today.

Legend and Lore

A mere half an hour away to the east along Tissamaharama Road is the sleepy village town of Kirinda.It is a name that is irrevocably linked with a legendary event surrounding a princess which has prevailed for over 2400 years. It is believed that the King Kelanitissa who ruled the Kingdom of Kelaniya in the west of the island sent forth his daughter, out to sea as an offering to appease the angered gods who had brought retribution to his kingdom with ferocious tidal waves. The brave princess who set sail not only stilled the waters in her wake but disembarked safely at a spot that is believed to be Kirinda. The princess was betrothed to the reigning King of the region to become Vihara Maha Devi and her statue stands high upon a

rock in Kirinda that bears testimony to the legend that still lives on today. Today, Kirinda is a quiet and diminutive fishing village with huts that lie strewn along a narrow beach strip beneath a rocky cliff. The livelihoods of people here remain intertwined in its famous past as little shops have sprung up with crafty knick knacks to entice curious visitors to these parts.

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